

# Collisions

## Affect Rescuers, Too!

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**Editor's note:** Sailors whose ships are involved in collisions or groundings aren't the only ones affected by such traumatic events. In the following article, the author describes how rescuing fellow Sailors after a collision with a merchant vessel left a somber, lasting impression. This collision took place in November of 1989 in the Strait of Malacca and involved the destroyer USS Kinkaid (DD 965) and the Panamanian-registered freighter, *Kota Petani*.

I was awakened with, "BM2! BM2! Get up! You need to man the boat deck! The *Kinkaid's* been hit!" I immediately jumped to my feet, assuming a missile had struck the destroyer. When I had finished waking the rest of the rescue boat crew, I dashed up on deck and looked ahead. I could see bright red flames shooting into the night sky, and I knew something terrible had happened. An American destroyer and a merchant ship had collided: This was going to be a long day!

I prepared to launch my boat and gave the bridge a manned-and-ready report within minutes. We went as fast as our engines could push us toward the two stricken vessels—our captain had told us there were people in the water, and we would be recovering survivors.

I strained to shake the sleep out of my eyes and yawned as I pushed the button to light my watch, which indicated 0520—the sun was nowhere in sight. As we approached *Kinkaid*, I could see the destroyer already had lowered its own boat into the water to retrieve survivors. Moments later, my

boat crew and I were ordered to stand down, so we returned to our ship. But before I could climb out of my boat, my crew was directed to load our boat with pumps, OBAs and cannisters and take them to the destroyer for fighting fires. As we again came alongside *Kinkaid*, I noted a huge gash in its starboard quarter. The flight deck also had been peeled back like a sardine can, and I could see inside the ship. We delivered the damage-control gear and began returning to our ship, but I slowed just enough to snap about a dozen photos of the damaged destroyer. An eerie feeling came over me as I suddenly had flashbacks to 1978, remembering the sickness I felt when my ship collided with a Navy frigate during a transit to Mexico.

I then snapped out of my daze and sped the boat back to our ship.

As quickly as we got aboard, we were tasked to man four fo'c'sle fire hoses and assist with extinguishing fires that were engulfing the merchant freighter. We hurriedly dressed out, laid out four fire hoses from different fire stations and waited for our ship to get into position. Our captain edged closer to the merchant vessel and came alongside to place our bow just forward of its bow. Gliding up, we gently scraped its side and continued forward: metal to metal until we were in position to render firefighting assistance. Closing on the merchant vessel ripped some stanchions from their mounts and damaged our ship, but we were in a position to help. Smoke billowed from a gaping hole in the merchant ship's bow as we watched its crew unsuccessfully try to charge a fire hose. Unfortunately, the source for the extinguishing agent had been damaged during the collision.

Meanwhile, I was nozzleman on one of our hoses and directed my stream into the burning ship's ripped bow. The smoke soon subsided, and we shut off our nozzles to assess the situation. Although the fire was out, we then learned the freighter was carrying paints and other flammable material, so our captain didn't delay in getting us as far away as possible from the merchant ship! We then again were directed to man the rescue boat. My orders were to go to the damaged *Kinkaid* to medevac injured crew members. We launched our boat and pulled alongside the destroyer—by now the fire had been extinguished, and an eerie calmness existed. Actually, the calmness was the shock setting in with the realization of what just had happened to a Navy ship only weeks from completing a Western Pacific deployment. Many of *Kinkaid's* crew also were thinking about the ship's officer who had died as he slept in his rack.

We stood by as the injured were readied for transfer. I got permission to climb aboard and take a few more snapshots. Looking down upon the destroyer's helo deck, I couldn't believe steel could bend in such a way. But it did—I have pictures to prove it.

The injured personnel then were lowered into my boat. Two were able to board on their own,

but the other two were strapped into stretchers. I recognized one Sailor with whom I had been on liberty just days ago during our last port visit. As he looked at me his eyes reflected the horror of that devastating collision—one which almost had taken his life. As I helped to secure the stretchers to the boat for the return transit to my ship, I lifted the blanket at the end of his stretcher and saw the skin had been ripped from the bottom of his feet. During the slow trip back to our ship, not a word was spoken. We later escorted the *Kinkaid* to the nearest port for repairs, then headed back out to sea and returned to our home port 10 days before Christmas.

My thoughts on that day were far away from home, in another country's port, with a crew who had proven themselves professional Sailors and who had saved their ship from certain disaster. One only can speculate about what might have happened had the fire spread into the torpedo and missile magazines. I shudder to think. Even after all these years, I still vividly recall that incident each time I transit the strait. That one day left a somber and lasting impression on me. 🇺🇸

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